

Message Text

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ACTION EA-12

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INFO AMEMBASSY BANGKOK

AMEMBASSY JAKARTA

AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR

AMEMBASSY MANILA

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EO 11652: NA

TAGS: PEPR, ELAB, MY, SN

SUBJ: SINGAPORE REACTION TO CRITICISM FROM MALAYSIA

1. STRAITS TIMES EDITORIAL APRIL 6, PROBABLY REFLECTING OFFICIAL OPINION, RELATES RECENT SPATE OF MALAYSIAN CRITICISM OF SINGAPORE TO PRE-ELECTORAL POLITICS ACROSS THE CAUSEWAY. EDITORIAL SUGGESTS THAT BILATERAL ISSUES BE APPROACHED UNEMOTIONALLY, AND SOLUTIONS SOUGHT IN A RATIONAL MANNER.

2. TEXT OF THE EDITORIAL FOLLOWS: "SEVERAL ISSUES HAVE BEEN RAISED RECENTLY FROM ACROSS THE CAUSEWAY SUGGESTING THAT SINGAPORE IS BEING PROBLEMATIC IN A NUMBER OF WAYS. THERE IS THE NOW CELEBRATED STUDY TO SHOW THAT MALAYSAINS WORKING HERE ARE MADE TO SUFFER A FATE WORSE THAN HELL. THEN THERE ARE THE COMPLAINTS THAT INTENSIVE DEVELOPMENT WORKS ON OUR SIDE OF THE JOHORE STRAITS HAVE CREATED DIFFICULTIES FOR KAMPUNGS IN SOUTH JOHORE. FOLLOWING THIS CAME A REPORT THAT THE

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KAMPUNG KENANGAN UMNO DIVISION IN JOHORE HAD PASSED A RESOLUTION URGING THE MALAYSIAN GOVERNMENT TO LEVY HIGHER DUTIES ON GOODS FROM THE REPUBLIC TO CHECK THE OUTFLOW OF THE RINGGIT. IN THE WEEKS AND MONTHS TO COME, IT CAN BE EXPECTED THAT SIMILAR POT SHOTS WILL BE AIMED AGAINST SINGAPORE, AS MALAYSIAN POLITICIANS GIRD THEIR LOINS TO DO ELECTORAL BATTLE. THIS IS NOT TO

SAY THAT THE ACCUSATIONS DIRECTED AT US HAVE NO SUBSTANCE; BUT ONE SHOULD REALIZE THAT IN THE MAKING OF POLITICAL CAPITAL, SINGAPORE IS STILL CONSIDERED FAIR GAME.

"MALAYSIAN WORKERS IN SINGAPORE ARE DEFINITELY NOT SINGLED OUT FOR DELIBERATE MISTREATMENT, BUT UNDOUBTEDLY THERE ARE UNDESIRABLE ASPECTS RELATED TO THEIR WORK AND STAY HERE. RESTRICTIONS ARE INEVITABLE, AND THERE ARE GOOD REASONS FOR THEM, EVEN IF SOME, LIKE THOSE PERTAINING TO MARRIAGE, APPEAR MANIFESTLY INHUMANITARIAN. IT IS TIME THAT THE SINGAPORE GOVERNMENT DOES SOMETHING TO MAKE THE MORE VALUABLE GUEST WORKERS LESS INSECURE. AS FOR THE KAMPUNGS IN SOUTH JOHORE FRONTING THE STRAITS, ALLEGATIONS THAT THEY ARE BEING FLOODED, OR THAT THEY ARE SINKING, ARE BEING STUDIED BY A MALAYSIAN TOP LEVEL COMMITTEE. ONCE THE FACTS ARE DETERMINED, THE MATTER CAN BE TAKEN UP BILATERALLY SO THAT THE PROBLEMS CAN BE RESOLVED, IF IT CAN BE ESTABLISHED THAT SINGAPORE IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THESE PHENOMENA. THUS IT IS FAR BETTER TO APPROACH BILATERAL ISSUES ON AN UNEMOTIONAL AND RATIONAL PLANE, AWAY FROM THE HEAT AND TURMOIL OF POLITICS. WILL IT BE TOO MUCH TO HOPE THAT THIS ATTITUDE WILL PREVAIL?"

3. COMMENT: OF THE MALAYSIAN CRITICISMS MENTIONED IN LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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THE EDITORIAL, THE ONLY ONE THAT HAS ATTRACTED MUCH LOCAL ATTENTION IS THAT CONCERNING WORKING AND LIVING CONDITIONS OF MALAYSIAN WORKERS IN SINGAPORE. THERE HAS BEEN HEAVY PRESS AND EDITORIAL COMMENT ON THE STUDY BY THE SELANGOR GRADUATES SOCIETY (REPORTED IN THE ASIAN WALL STREET JOURNAL ON MARCH 30), WHICH CLAIMS THAT MALAYSIAN WORKERS IN SINGAPORE "LIVE IN POOR CONDITIONS,...PERFORM THE HARDEST AND MOST DANGEROUS JOBS AND ARE SUBJECT TO DEGRADING, UNJUST AND INHUMANE LAWS ON MARRIAGE AND STERILIZATION." THE DIFFICULTY WITH WHICH COMMENT HAS BEEN ELICITED FROM GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS, AND THE INDIGNATION WITH WHICH NTUC OFFICIALS HAVE GREETED THE CHARGES, INDICATE THE SENSITIVITY OF THE SUBJECT. ALLEGATIONS ABOUT WORKING AND LIVING CONDITIONS HAVE EITHER BEEN REFUTED, EXPLAINED, OR MET WITH THE COMMENT "IF MALAYSIAN WORKERS FIND LIFE HERE SO UNBEARABLE THEY WOULD HAVE GONE BACK FROM WHENCE THEY CAME." (STRAITS TIMES EDITORIAL, MARCH 31). THE STUDY'S CRITICISMS OF POLICIES TOWARD MARRIAGE AND CHILD BEARING OF ALIENS HAVE, HOWEVER, EITHER BEEN IGNORED, OR DISMISSED RATHER LAMELY.

4. THE TONE OF THE EDITORIAL SUGGSTS THAT ALTHOUGH SINGAPORE UNDERSTANDS THAT IT IS "FAIR GAME" IN MALAYSIAN ELECTORAL POLTICS, IT RESENTS BEING MADE THE TARGET OF WHAT IT SEES AS EMOTIONAL AND IRRATIONAL ATTACKS FROM ITS ERSTWHILE COMPATRIOTS TO THE NORTH. ON THE OTHER HAND, THERE IS ALSO IN THE EDITORIAL A HINT THAT PERHAPS THE GOS MIGHT TAKE A SECOND LOOK AT THE CONDITION OF THE MALAYSIAN "GUEST WORKERS" HERE.

5. THIS SUBJECT WILL BE DISCUSSED IN GREATER DETAIL IN AN AIRGRAM NOW UNDER PREPARATION.
INGRAHAM

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